



PUBLIC LECTURE

co-organised by the Department of Methods in the Social Sciences at the University of Vienna, the Department of Political Science at the Institute for Advanced Studies and the Section "Comparative European Politics" of the Austrian Political Science Association (ÖGPW)

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The Weight of Religious Cleavage and Political Context in a Fragmented Political System. Italy 2006-2008

Wednesday, 6 May 2009, 16:00
IHS, Stumpergasse 56,
1060 Wien, conference room, 6th floor (SZ VI)

After the restructuring of the party system in the mid-1990s, the study of electoral behaviour in Italy has generally been carried out considering the dependent variable (electoral choice) as a dichotomous one. Following the development of the political competition, the voter was considered to have two main choices: either voting for the centre-right coalition led by Mr. Berlusconi or voting for the centre-left coalition, which included the main social-democratic party.

Although this approach simplified the analyses of voting behaviour, it seriously limited comparisons across time, given the continuous changes of the political supply, with the emergency of new parties and changes in the composition of the main coalitions. These limitations even increased in 2006, when a proportional electoral system replaced the previous majority system, with significant consequences on parties' electoral strategies.

To overcome these problems in the diachronic study of voting behaviour, following van der Brug, van der Eijk and Franklin (2007), the paper proposes to replace the traditional dependent variable (electoral choice) with a new dependent variable: the levels of party support, also known as party utilities, defined as the probability of a respondent to ever cast a vote for a specific party and asked for all the parties present in the electoral competition. By means of an innovative treatment of data, this conceptual and methodological choice allows to take into account both individual factors and party characteristics in the definitions of the voters' preferences and

opens the field for a possible improvement in long term longitudinal comparison. This is particularly true for the assessment of the effects of traditional cleavages on voting behaviour, as the impact of these factors is not independent from the political context.

Using data coming from the Italian National Election Study, the paper considers as an example the impact of the religious cleavage on voting behaviour in 2001 and 2006 Italian elections, showing that the structure of the competition more than social cleavages can affect individual party support.

Cristiano Vezzoni is Researcher in Political Sociology, Department of Social and Political Studies, University of Milan. His substantive research interests are in political behavior, relations between religion and politics, contextual effects on voting. His methodological interests concern the development for and application of statistical methods in comparative survey research, with a particular focus on problems of measurement. He teaches the Measurement models course at the Essex Summer School in Data Analysis.